

Book review: Ismail Fajrie Alatas: What is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia

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to one of the book's core concerns, namely mobility and travel. The inclusion of at least a few images of women on pilgrimage would have been highly welcome to deepen the reader's insight into the book's fundamental theme in a visual way. Finally, Muslim communities are facing dramatic social and cultural changes, particularly among young Muslims and the so-called "Muslim Z generation", who make up a substantial portion of the global Muslim community. The book sadly does not pay attention to this huge group of young Muslim pilgrims, which would have rounded off the otherwise multi-perspective elaboration of the issue.

However, in any regard, this timely publication should be of interest for scholars of Islamic Studies, the anthropology of *hajj* in particular and pilgrimage in general, the anthropology of Islam, Mobility Studies and Women's Studies, for some time to come. For example, the essays collected in this book effectively present the connectedness between Muslim women's pilgrimage and other issues, such as the market, shopping activities and business. In this way, they contribute to the flourishing trend to move away from stereotyped, essentialist and exclusionary views of Muslim women. The editors' ambition to concentrate "on how such cultures inform the normative, social and practical dimensions of their pilgrimage practices, and, in turn, how women's practices inform specific discourses on their mobility" (p. 13) is clearly expressed throughout the book. Furthermore, this publication adds valuable perspective to the theories of pilgrimage, which are otherwise mainly formed in a masculine and non-Islamic context.

Peyman Eshaghi

ISMAIL FAJRIE ALATAS, *What is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia*. (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021. Xvi, 268 pages, 1 map, \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-6912-0431-4

The Bā 'Alawīs, who claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, or *sayyids*, have been an increasingly popular topic of study over the last twenty years. Historians and anthropologists, or the confluence of the two, have enormously contributed to the study of this distinct community from the Ḥaḍramawt valley in Yemen, as well as their diaspora in the Indian Ocean, thereby reshaping a new discourse of a "transnational turn" since the 1990s. Among other scholarship, Engseng Ho's macro-diachronic analysis, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (University of California Press, 2006), is a landmark in this transregional/transnational study, as it innovatively interprets the diasporic community from the late medieval period onwards through

the lens of genealogy and mobility. Ho's masterful narrative, creative metaphors and employment of multiple spaces and times invigorate the significance of the genealogical past for the hybrid lives, texts and geographies of this transoceanic community.

What is Religious Authority? by Ismail Fajrie Alatas continues the direction of this interpretive study, combining history and cultural anthropology. Drawing from but departing from Ho, Alatas amalgamates the historical diachrony and contemporary synchrony of the *sayyids* in Java, Indonesia, by reproducing the "practical and ideological centrality of genealogy and mobility in the formation of Islamic authority" (p. 110). In this sense, Alatas's case study is a micro-analysis of Indonesian *sayyids* from the aftermath of the Great War of Java in the early nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century and how they followed two different paths of mobility in the pursuit of religious authority: internal and external. The former is highlighted in the author's account of transregional travel, circulation and the pursuit of knowledge within the same Bā 'Alawīs, from Yemen to Indonesia back and forth, or within itinerant contexts on the island of Java. The latter is demonstrated in what Alatas calls "divergent mobility", describing the religious authority of Habib Luthfi bin Yahya of Pekalongan (b. 1947), the distinctive Sufi master in present-day Indonesia and the main protagonist of this book, in seeking sacred legitimacy from non-*sayyid* luminaries in Java in addition to his own divine and worldly wanderings in order to "cultivate" Islamic congregations beyond the boundaries of the Bā 'Alawīs.

By combining these two trajectories, this book does not aim to produce an anthropological biography of Habib Luthfi per se. Rather, it compares various actors, locations, texts and materialities in a bold narrative to examine the transmission of Islamic knowledge and the social enactment of Prophetic teachings, namely the living *sunnah*, culminating in the account of how Habib Luthfi became a saint. The Weberian paradigm of routinisation of charisma, Alatas reveals, is insufficient to understand religious authority. Following Hannah Arendt, the author argues that religious authority rests "on the recognition of their [religious leaders'] connection to the Prophetic past and hinges on a hierarchical relationship that allows them to articulate Prophetic teachings for others without resorting to coercion" (p. 4). A corollary of this formulation leads to the observation that this authority is extremely dynamic and requires the constant labour of (re)production and maintenance. Even authorities that have often been deemed charismatic – in the Weberian point of view – must repeat and reproduce the labour of articulating Prophetic teachings and transmitting to or connecting them with the community.

In this sense, Alatas develops the doctrinal dimension of *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamā'ah* (the people of the *sunnah* and the community) into a multifaceted exploration of the social realities, possibilities and contingencies of the foundational past, religious authorities and the community. The author underpins his

Arendtian theorem of “articulatory labor” as “the labor of articulating *Sunna*”, which is repeatedly stated as a key concept throughout the book, on the basis of his eclectic, if not synthetic, approach and critical reading of various Western thinkers from Hegel and Marx to contemporary philosophers and different theorists in Islamic studies in Western academia, including inter alia Talal Asad, Shahab Ahmed and Shahzad Bashir. Although the case study is of Central Java, the author’s use of the multiple genealogies of Ḥaḍramī scholars and saints produces a theoretical contribution that presents not only a refined understanding of Islamic authority but also the universality of Islam as a “concrete universality”. What makes Islam universal is, he argues, the concrete labour of articulating the *sunnah* and the community that has engendered doctrinal and practical multiplicity.

The first part of this book, comprising three chapters, discusses the historical formation of Islamic communities between the Ḥaḍramawt and Java and the making and unmaking of religious authorities in Pekalongan, Central Java, by tracing multiple genealogies and mobilities of saints as well as their connections to politics and infrastructure that materialised their *modus operandi* in concrete and ever-changing ways. As part of his successful portrayal of the role of the general Sufi orders and saints in Java as links to Islamic teachings, including the Shaṭṭāriyyah and Naqshbandiyyah-Khālidiyyah, the author describes the “Ḥaddādian paradigm”, named after the legendary Bā ‘Alawī scholar ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720) – the highly effective praxis of religious articulation between Ḥaḍramawt and Java. Concise texts and litanies that emulated a classical form of textual summary, composed by al-Ḥaddād, were indeed widely disseminated across the Indian Ocean, especially from the nineteenth century onwards. In Java, these textual and performative dimensions became a particular paradigm at that time, as Islamic authorities dispersed following the defeat of Prince Dipanegara by the Dutch colonial power in the nineteenth century. This paradigm, according to the author, was prominent in proselytising practical Sufism and teaching the laity in rural and urban areas of Central Java through its constant reproduction by *shaykhs al-ta’līm* or religious propagators in various communities.

Based on the historical and cultural settings in the first part of his book, Alatas presents the making of Habib Luthfi’s Sufi genealogies, networks, hagiographic imaginaries and religious authority in the second part. The author compares Habib Luthfi and his Bā ‘Alawī counterparts over the last century to those of more recent years to demonstrate the convergence between the Ḥaddādian paradigm and Habib Luthfi’s wide-ranging efforts in pursuing different scholarly and Sufi itineraries that reshaped his authority in cultivating diverse segments of Muslim communities and his relations with politics and state actors. Although the labour of Habib Luthfi has not always been smooth, he has become the foremost Sufi master, whose edifying method extensively attracts commoners, elites,

militaries, scholars, businessmen and other social classes locally and nationally. The second part of the book, consisting of four chapters, provide a vivid portrayal of Habib Luthfi as a Sufi master who, unlike his rivals who use only Arabic, excels at local languages, is able to collect diverse social groups, creates cooperation with state apparatuses, and has become the epitome of the “living *sunna*”.

Alatas constantly refers to his informed theorisation of labour and its derivations and finally portrays the historical and contemporary figures with a series of vivid images and re-interpretations. He fills an important gap in the historiography and ethnography of the Indonesian *sayyids* with a fresh scholarly comprehension of cultural semiotics. One of the most important themes is that his redefinition of multi-voiced articulations and practices of the *sunnah* throughout history and contemporary lives encourages scholars of Islam, in Asia and elsewhere, not to use in scholarly production the vague ideas of religious syncretism and heterodoxy as opposed to the Christian-based notion of orthodoxy. Despite the book’s merit in bringing together both theories and narratives, readers might expect to learn more about various Arabic terms coined by the Bā ‘Alawīs, such as *shaykhs al-ta’līm*, which seems to be predominantly used as a category for all Javanese societies. Other technical terms, such as *manṣab* to refer to a “successor”, might need to be specifically explained in a glossary, since *manṣab* in medieval Damascus is historically a stipendiary post (see Michael Chamberlain’s *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350*; Cambridge University Press, 1995). In addition, useful appendixes would have been helpful to map the rather tedious and not particularly exploratory genealogies (*silsilahs*) of various mentioned Sufis and the various books they learned as part of their scholarly vitae in addition to their Sufi importance. Such basic research is necessary to ground different notions of intellectual authority vis-à-vis, or even in combination with, religious authority.

Students and specialists of Islamic Studies might also expect this fascinating study to be related to established methods and literatures pertaining to the study of *sayyids*. In this case, Kazuo Morimoto’s series of what he calls “sayyido-sharifology” is missing from this book. Other sources that are not cited include, for instance, Abdel Ahad Sebti’s 1984 study of the Moroccan sharifs (*Aristocratie citadine, pouvoir et discours savant au Maroc pré-colonial*), which also deals with saints and power. The author’s reference to “sociocultural capital” (p. 183) does not mention Bourdieu’s famous theory, although Alatas obviously intends to break away from the latter’s original theory, as with his intention to destabilise the Weberian notion of authority. Kevin Reinhart’s *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition*, published in 2020 (Cambridge University Press), which overlaps with some of the ideas of this book, was probably not yet available to Alatas when this book’s manuscript was completed. There is at least one factual error: the death of the Meccan scholar and Sufi master Muḥammad b. ‘Alawī al-Mālikī was in 2004, not 2006. The author additionally

does not adequately address his clarification that “the Ḥaddānian paradigm complemented, but also competed with, other text-centered articulatory paradigms brought by pilgrims returning from Mecca” (p. 63) – a statement that is presumably intended to explain other existing “paradigms”, including the Shaṭṭāriyah’s role from the seventeenth century onwards, in ordering and maintaining the basic Sufi litany and cosmology throughout maritime Southeast Asia.

Finally, readers of the social sciences will also notice the absence of the concept of “civil society” in this book, and it fails to address the question of whether or not the social formation of Habib Luthfi’s religious authority, for example, blurs the identity boundaries of citizens between society and state. Or, reading between the lines, one might view this book as a contemplation of the unnecessary differentiation between state and civil society, describing instead an elastic, yet coherent movement that preserves a unitary vision of political aspiration, a prolonged version of the classical political theology of *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamā‘ah* (Sunnism): a state-religion-society mutual alliance to maximise social order in pluralistic, if not sectarian, milieus such as Indonesia.

Nonetheless, historians, anthropologists and readers of social sciences in general will definitely consider this highly recommended book as a valuable resource to read and ponder.

Zacky Khairul Umam

MINA ROCES, *The Filipino Migration Experience: Global Agents of Change*. Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 2021. 254 pages, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-6040-2

The Filipino Migration Experience was refreshing to read, especially because of the way Mina Roces uses “migrant archives” to reveal more detail about how migrants act as “global agents of change” through their consumption, activism and philanthropy. The book is a much-needed intervention in the academic literature that overwhelmingly sees migrants as victims of the global system that exploits their labour and entails high social costs for them and their families. Its historical perspective differs from the dominant narrative that positions the migrant as a “disenfranchised laborer” (p. 7). The migrants the author has chosen to focus on tell a complementary story that is replete with information about how they have transformed social norms, shaped economic activity, acted as philanthropists and curated their own histories.

The book is divided into three parts that examine different ways in which migrants are “global agents of change”. First, Mina Roces examines how migrants have impacted social norms that relate to the family as well as gender